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BETTER MOTHERS

BY WILLIE CARHART MOREHEAD

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It has long been a matter of serious conjecture with me, if it were not putting the cart before the horse to talk so much of better babies, while we hear practically nothing of better mothers, for how can we expect better babies before we have better mothers?

Whenever a woman is faced with the necessity of going forth and making her own livelihood, the first question she asks herself is, What can I do? and whatever position she aspires to, whether that of cook in someone's kitchen, or a big salaried position of grave responsibility, she knows that when she applies for this job, she must produce satisfactory evidence that she is qualified for the position before she can hope to be entrusted with the particular work. And yet when you or I are selected for the biggest, most vital place a woman can aspire to, Wifehood, with even possible Motherhood, it never occurs to anyone to question, Is this girl fitted for this job? And why? Because we still cling to the old threadbare, fallacious theory that mother instinct is all the preparation a young mother needs in order to hold the most precious trust God lays upon womankind.

Mother instinct is the greatest force on earth to-day, yet the pet cat, or the family cow, has the same instinct, and should not we, as intelligent human beings, rise above this and produce the greatest force the world could ever know, trained mother-instinct?

Germany has a law that all girls and mothers must be trained for motherhood. The world is past believing that Germany is capable of doing anything with a desire to uplift humanity; this law surely sprang from her desire to increase the power of the nation, by safeguarding her future population. Whatever the selfish motive behind this law, it seems to me we would do well to adopt a similar one for our country. Think of the thousands of lives that would be saved, which are now needlessly sacrificed through the gross ignorance of our young mothers.

France and England are rapidly realizing the vital necessity of the protection of their young and are making great strides towards this end, while we Americans who are, or think we are, the most progressive nation on earth, cling to the old suicidal theory about mother instinct, with the exception of a few local organizations in the big cities.

Who of us has not known a young prospective mother, in whom mother instinct is just awakening, who is looking forward along the

vista of years to come, with the realization of how truly worth while life can seem with the young life to plan for, for whom, suddenly, the bright vista is changed by premature birth or some other fatal complication? And why? Because through ignorance this woman failed to heed some warning of nature, as she had always been told that nature must take its course!

The words of my old professor in obstetrics occur to me just here: "A woman should be under a physician's observation for ten months, beginning with the first month of pregnancy, on up to the time the baby is a month old, and during that time, if anything occurs which she does not understand, she should not confer with her women friends, but see her physician—at once." If this advice were given to every woman, there would be thousands upon thousands of lives saved each year and fewer broken hearts and empty arms.

Another dangerous and fallacious theory is that any one can assist in a confinement case. Women who are faced with the necessity of an abdominal operation will insist upon having one or two of the best surgical nurses, and the best surgeon, in the most up-to-the-minute hospital, that their means can command; but for a confinement they will be content with almost any doctor and a colored mammy, or worse, the so-called experienced nurse. There is no case where the truth of the saying, "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing" is better shown than with the so-called experienced nurse on a confinement case. The black mammy has at least her own mother instinct to guide her, as well as her life-long habit of obeying orders.

In the abdominal operation there is only one life at stake, while in the confinement case there are two lives hanging in the balance, with the chances for fatal complications doubled and trebled; and then at most unexpected places, arises the absolute necessity of two pairs of skilled hands and two trained minds if both lives are to be saved. If one life must be sacrificed for lack of assistance to the physician, it is always the little life, so full of possibilities, which has been called into being only to be snuffed out by the lack of preparation and forethought, and we are faced with the bitter reflection, "It need not have happened!"

It is unnecessary to go into details regarding what untrained mother instinct does for the poor little waifs, once they have arrived. We have all known of the baby who is fed every fifteen minutes or so, if it happens to cry that often, and the subsequent colic, but the firm idea that a baby is not a baby without colic is accepted, along with the baby! Then the baby that is jounced and bounced, tickled and tumbled, and allowed only about half the sleep it requires, until this most delicately adjusted mechanism in the world is deprived of its

digestive, nervous and mental equilibrium. Hence comes the vast need for school nurses to assist defective children through school.

This is the day of preventive, rather than curative, medicine and surely the logical beginning is with the embryo babies. We twentieth century mothers should set ourselves the task of giving our children and our neighbors' children the advantages we ourselves have not had. The first essential is a firm foundation of sound health. Personally, I should prefer that my daughter should excel with the tennis racket, than with the embroidery needle, for with the out-door sport come good sound lungs, red blood and, better than all else, a well balanced nervous system. Without these assets, no girl can enter upon the limitless strain of a mother's exacting duties, sanely, sweetly and joyfully.

Mothers, teachers and guardians should lay aside the old rusty ideas of false modesty and tell our girls and boys the things they should know, the things they need to know about themselves. It is only in common decency and justice to them that we do this, for forewarned is forearmed.

I often look back to a scene in the big city where I was in training as a nurse, to the bedside of an erring girl, who was giving up her life for the baby to which she had no legitimate right, whose last words were, "O, nurse! my mother never told me anything! My mother never told me anything!"

In my eyes, at least, that young girl was shriven of her guilt and it was laid on that prudish, complacent mother, somewhere in the background, who had sent forth that young life without a weapon to use against the world, the flesh and the devil.

The Red Cross has characterized public health work as the first line of national defence, so let us, as mothers, look especially to that duty, remembering that this line of trenches is also home defence.

The mother who feels that her duty to her children ends with the home is, in my opinion, shooting far wide of the mark, for comparatively little of that child's life will be spent in the shelter of the home, and it is the mother's duty and privilege to look into the conditions in church, school and community, into the spiritual, physical and moral influences which are to surround that young life when it gets beyond the protection of her arms, for we can no more be good mothers without being good citizens than we can be good citizens without being good mothers.